

R. ANTHONY LEWIS

“Language and Translation: Contesting Conventions”

Keywords:

conventional translation theories, hybrid languages, languages, mixed languages, non-standard language systems, symmetry between languages, texts, translation between communities, unstable languages

1. Author information

R. Anthony Lewis is an ethnic Jamaican. He is a senior lecturer in the Department of Liberal Studies, University of Technology, Jamaica. He heads the Foreign Languages Division in the Department of Liberal Studies, and teaches French, English and Communication. He holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics, translation option (Université de Montréal). He is a member of the Caribbean Sexuality Research Group, and sits on the board of the Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition.

His research interests include translation theory and non-standard languages as well as creolisation and nationalisms (St-Pierre and Kar 2005: XIII). He is also committed to the problem of sexuality in African diaspora communities.

His contribution to translation studies is recognised for bringing up the issue of translation in the aspect of mixed or hybrid languages (e.g. dialects), which he considers to be neglected because of viewing translation as an operation on independent languages.

2. Abstract

Lewis points to the paradox of inexplicable terms used by known theoreticians of translation studies, such as faithfulness and equivalence. Translation theory is perceived by some

theorists to be structuralist in orientation, which is inadequate for non-standard languages. This poses challenges to conventional translation theories. According to Lewis, we are facing the evolution of thinking about translation. The mixed, hybrid languages require non-standard methods. He considers them to be an enrichment of language, not a contamination. Therefore, Lewis proposes a view of translation as a text transformation within a language rather than between languages.

The problem of non-standard languages and translation has shed light on the whole translation theory. The heritage of structuralist linguistics helps only in ideal situations, although a real symmetry between languages can never be granted to any language, especially to such variants as dialect, sociolect, jargon or pidgin language, etc.

In order to translate a text (be it a pure language text or a type of linguistic hybrid) modern scholars have to rely more on cognitive methods than on classic means. For a long time, translation theory has not even incorporated non-standard language systems into translation studies. Nowadays it is impossible to analyse a process of translation without taking account of their fluid ambience.

The seminal idea to remember from the text is that languages are not inalterable, and linguistic norms are just guidelines, rather than describing the whole range of occurrences coexisting in a particular language and between other language systems.

3. Terminology

In order to better understand the contents, some terms are necessary to be explained.

Source text term	Meaning	Term in Polish
autonomous, homogenous languages	languages consistent in their structure	autonomiczne, homogeniczne języki ?
conventional translation theories, conventional	theories based on the structural approach	tradycyjne, konwencjonalne

conceptions of translation		teorie przekładu ?
dominant languages	widely known formalised languages	języki dominujące ?
equivalence	dynamic equivalence attempts to convey the thought expressed in a source text, while formal equivalence attempts to render the text word-for-word	ekwiwalencja
faithfulness	conception to which a translation accurately renders the meaning of the source text, without distortion	adekwatność
formal, linguistic components in source and target languages	codified rules which create a symmetry between languages	formalne, lingwistyczne komponenty języka źródłowego i docelowego ?
horizontal system of interpenetration	mixing of several languages in frontier areas (e.g. American-Mexican “Spanglish,” Russian-Chinese “Kyakhta Pidgin,” Russo-Norwegian “Russenorsk”)	poziomy system przenikania ?
interlingual frontiers	illusive barrier between languages	granice językowe ?
<i>langue</i>	term used by Ferdinand de Saussure, describes the social, impersonal phenomenon of language as a system of signs	<i>langue</i>
linguistic fluidity	attribute of language that never remains still	płynność językowa ?
linguistic hybridisation/mixture	a process of merging two or more languages in a sort of dialect	hybrydyzacja, mieszanie języków ?
linguistic stability	attribute of language with solid position, well codified	stabilność językowa ?

linguistics-based definitions	analyses which use natural language concepts	definicje językoznawcze ?
minority varieties	others, less popular language systems	warianty mniejszościowe ?
mixed or hybrid languages	came into beginning as a result of several interfering languages, e.g. pidgin	języki mieszane, hybrydy ?
mutual exclusivity of languages	two events that cannot occur at the same time	wzajemna wyłączość języków ?
non-standard varieties, language systems	all others language systems which allow various interpretations of meaning or structure	niestandardowe odmiany, systemy językowe ?
normalisation, homogenisation, standardisation	a process of working out the rules, linguistic norms, applied afterwards to create a text according to them	normalizacja, homogenizacja, standaryzacja ?
normalised languages	languages with formalised sets of rules	języki znormalizowane ?
normalised, homogenous, standard language	language that already has its system of linguistic norms	znormalizowany, homogeniczny, ustandaryzowany język ?
normative linguistic entity	well codified, formalised language	normatywna językowa całość ?
<i>parole</i>	term used by Ferdinand de Saussure, describes the individual, personal phenomenon of language as a series of speech acts made by a linguistic subject	<i>parole</i>
source language	the language of original text	język źródłowy
structuralist linguistics	examining language as a static system of interconnected units	lingwistyka strukturalna

symmetry between languages	conception based on the assumption that in ideal situation the source text and the target text are to be considered logically and situationally interchangeable	symetria między językami ?
target language	the language into which a text is to be translated	język docelowy
the qualities of language	used to describe text, its own style, content, meaning and context	właściwości języka ?
transfers <i>between</i> languages	transfers based on the horizontal system of interpenetration	przeniesienie <i>między</i> językami ?
transfers <i>in</i> language	transfers based on the vertical system of interpenetration	przeniesienie <i>w</i> języku ?
transformation of semantic content	approach to translation by the study of meaning, focused on the relation between words, phrases, signs and symbols, and what they stand for	przekształcenie zawartości semantycznej ?
translation process	research and the communication of the meaning of a source-language text by means of an equivalent target-language text	proces tłumaczenia
translation theory	contemplation about the best way to translate a text	teoria przekładu
unstable language	fluid, unstable language without or with insufficient linguistic norms	język niestabilny ?
usage components in source and target languages	linguistic forms acceptable in a language but not formalized	uzus językowy w języku źródłowym i docelowym ?
vertical system of interpenetration	many varieties coexist in a hierarchy of standard forms and less standard forms used in different social or cultural situations (e.g. dialect, sociolect, jargon)	pionowy system przenikania?

4. Methodology

Lewis proposes a new solution, but his research is based on a sound footing. He specifies significant remarks and observations of famous personages in translation studies, and later presents various definitions of translation itself.

The method applied by the author consists of the collation of existing research, then reasoning based on his own experience and presentation of arguments necessary to prove the main thesis. His research combines several methods like constructive or empirical research.

5. Links with other publications on the subject

The subject raised by Lewis belongs to a relatively new domain of translation studies. It also addresses many issues, for example, the problem of translating culture or inter-semiotic translation.

Similar publications:

Lewis, R. A. 2005. "Through the Prism of Creolisation: Language, Nationalism and Translation", in: *Translation Studies in the New Millennium* 3, 53–71.

Lewis, R. A. 2004. "Language, Culture and Power: Haiti under the Duvaliers", in: *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 50, n° 4, 42–51.

Lewis, R. A. 2003. "Langue métissée et traduction: quelques enjeux théoriques", in: *Meta*, vol. 48, n° 3, 411–420, <http://www.erudit.org/revue/meta/2003/v48/n3/007601ar.html> (retrieved 21st Nov 2011).

Lewis, R. A. 2002. "Non-standard Languages and Translation: Some Theoretical Concerns", in: *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, vol. 15, 25–36.

Lubis, S., Mono, U. “The Challenges of Translating an Ethnic Ritual Text of Mandailing.”
<http://english.um.edu.my/anuvaada/PAPERS/LUBIS.pdf> (retrieved 21st Nov 2011).

Bret, D. 2009. “Eye Dialect: Translating the Untranslatable”, in: *Annali della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere di Sassari*, vol. 6, 49–62.
http://www.uniss.it/lingue/annali_file/vol_6/4_Brett_Lost.pdf (retrieved 21st Nov 2011).

Bandia, P. F. 1994. “On Translating Pidgins and Creoles in African Literature”, in: *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, vol. 7, n° 2, 93–114.
<http://www.erudit.org/revue/ttr/1994/v7/n2/037182ar.pdf> (retrieved 21st Nov 2011);

Alemán, J. 2008. “Barbarous Tongues: Immigrant Fiction and Ethnic Voices in Contemporary American Literature”, in: *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 54, n° 2, 398–404.

Torop P. 2002. “Translation as translating as culture”, in: *Sign Systems Studies*, 30(2), 593–605.
<http://www.ut.ee/SOSE/sss/pdf/torop302.pdf> (retrieved 21st Nov 2011).

6. Critical commentary

I have chosen this particular essay because of the subject: a new point of view in the domain of translation studies, presented in a very straightforward manner.

Although Lewis elegantly slides along definitions and theses, it is with no encumbrance to the reader. His objectives are clear and the reader can easily follow his process of thinking thanks to the references he makes at every turn.

In my opinion the article marks the beginning of a whole new chapter in translation studies, and also encourages scholars to search for other publications. The problem exposed by Lewis is only the tip of the iceberg as the subject is not exhausted and will not be – even after years of study – because it involves language studies, and language evolves constantly.

There are many outcomes of the research conducted. The most important one is that the translator has to meet many challenges and continuously study culture and its relations with other cultures in order to be able to not only translate, but also transmit the meaning of the source text. Another substantial conclusion is that we cannot only depend on some already existing theories, but we can use them to constitute new values. Finally, the most obvious thing pointed out by the author is that every language or variety deserves our attention because they represent unique variants and they are significant for the development of mainstream homogenous languages.

7. Quotation to remember the text by

“The inevitable consequence of viewing translation as an operation on independent languages is that little attention is generally paid to mixed or hybrid languages. Yet, these languages may in fact provide the basis for rethinking the structuralist tendencies that translation studies has been seeking to discard. (...) They generally lack the sharp boundaries typical of standardised languages, making it impossible for them to enter into the symmetrical language relationships that have come to characterise conventional definitions of translation” (Lewis 2007: 34).

“While conventional translation studies relies on notions such as source language and target language, which assume relationships of symmetry (and hence notions such as equivalence and faithfulness), an alternative view would privilege the transformation of a communicative act by one community (or an individual from that community) into a meaningful communicative act for another community (or an individual in that community). In this process, the focus is effectively shifted from knowledge of a ‘language’ to knowledge of the cultural, social and situational possibilities in communicative acts” (Lewis 2007: 36).

8. References

Lewis, R. A. 2005. “Language and Translation: Contesting Conventions”, in: Paul St-Pierre and Prafulla C. Kar (eds), *In Translation – Reflections, Refractions, Transformations*. Amsterdam. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. 27–37.

<http://linguistlist.org/people/personal/get-personal-page2.cfm?PersonID=111440> (retrieved 21st Nov 2011).

<http://www.cvccoalition.org/pages/Governance.php> (retrieved 21st Nov 2011)

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